10. Runaway and Throwaway Children

Runaway and throwaway children are not a problem unique to the Wasatch Front communities located between Ogden and Provo: Christopher Williams has written thoughtful articles for the *Logan Herald-Journal* about "throwaway" children in Cache Valley.[1] Utah Issues and Travelers Aid Society performed a detailed look at this problem in Salt Lake in 1992, which did a "Survey of Homeless Youth." The findings are so important to understanding "street kids" that with the permission of the authors we will present in the following pages the results of this survey in the language of the authors without further attribution or quotation marks.[2]

Method[3]

Study Design and Procedure

Due to the absence of hard data on this sub-population of the homeless (locally or in the literature), we set out to develop a profile of homeless youths' family background, habits, needs, and opinions. An exploratory and descriptive study was designed. The site for the study was Salt Lake City's downtown area between South Temple and Second South, and State Street and West Temple, which is a well-known gathering area for these kids. Interviews were collected periodically during the 11-month period of July 1991 to May 1992.

We felt it was imperative to use the utmost sensitivity in approaching these kids for a number of reasons. First, many of the kids are on the run, and therefore afraid to talk to adults, especially anyone answering personal questions. Second, most of these kids are accustomed to being harassed and told to "leave" or "move on" or asked questions which might get them taken into custody. Consequently, they are extremely reticent about opening up. There is also a code of honor among the street youth. The kids respect each others' privacy and will not tell anything about who *else* is homeless, point them out, or reveal any pertinent information. Finally, many of these kids have been hurt emotionally and they simply do not want to talk or share information.

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[1]Christopher Williams, "On the Streets: Cache Valley's Homeless Children," *Logan Herald-Journal*, 21 March 1993, and "Help For Homeless Is Available, Officials Say," 21 March 1993.

[2]Sally Marriott, Steve Erickson, and Liza Gonzales, *Homeless Youth: Life on the Streets in Salt Lake City* (Salt Lake City: October 1992); "a research project of Utah Issues Information Program and the Travelers Aid Society of Salt Lake City". The study specifically thanks the following for their help: The *Salt Lake Tribune*/Bob Ottum Fund and the Utah Board of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; Salt Lake County Human Services; Salt Lake City Police Department; Patrick Poulin, then of Travelers Aid Society, and the Salt Lake Community Shelter and Resource Center; Debra Caswell; Corinna Porter, Lyn Sorensen, Julie Blackwell, Robert Wray, Robyn Schultz, LaMar Eyre, and Pat Berkman, "and most importantly, to the homeless youth of Salt Lake City, especially those who were willing to share with us their feelings and experiences." Some editorial changes have been made so that this report fits stylistically in this broader *Homeless Count*, such as changing "%" to "percent."

[3]Some of the reporting will contain less than 43 responses due to the fact that these youths were not obligated to respond to questions they felt uncomfortable answering. Many chose to skip over the section dealing with their family.

Given the above constraining factors within which we needed to work, we had to approach potential subjects in a circumspect manner. It would have been crude at best to approach one of these kids and demand to know "Are you homeless, and are you under 18?" Therefore, our research required non-adherence to rigid definitions, and the employment of keen observation along a number of dimensions including appearance, mannerisms, and information provided by the subjects themselves.

Criteria for inclusion in the study were that the youth be homeless and under 18 years of age. Key informants in the community, such as SLC Police foot patrol were helpful in pointing out kids they knew were living on the streets. In addition, the main interviewer used the following physical determinants to facilitate identification of potential subjects: evidence of having not washed for a period of time (dirty hair and fingernails), body odor, clothes dirty, condition of shoes, and wearing the same clothes day after day.[4] Once a candidate for the study was identified, the head interviewer asking the youth where they were staying and how long they had been out on the street initiated contact. The upper age limit was relaxed and several youths 18 years and older (two were 20 years old) were included for the following reason: they were 18 or older, but when asked "How long have you been on the streets?" they answered "Since I was 14," or "4 years." Their background as an underage youth, on the streets, met the criteria of the study, hence they were included. None of the youths identified as eligible for inclusion in the study who were asked to participate declined. Hence, the participation rate was 100 percent.

Interviewers went out on the streets in pairs, and restricted their movement to the above outlined geographical locality. All interviews were conducted in public places such as restaurants, or coffee shops. The interview took about an hour to complete. As part of the process, the head interviewer was allocated $15 per interviewee. Each subject who accepted to participate in the survey was asked if they were hungry and if the interviewer could buy them something to eat. None declined this offer. Upon the completion of the interview, the respondent was given whatever remained of the $15, after buying something to eat. None of the respondents knew they would receive any compensation at the time they agreed to participate in the study.

It is important to elaborate upon a particular methodological issue of dealing with individuals who are "on the run," secretive, or otherwise different from the general population in background and/or psychological character. Originally, the questionnaire we developed was to be conducted with interviewers *asking* the respondents questions. This method failed with this sub-population. It was quickly discovered that *asking questions* would have alienated the kids and undermined the study. Instead, each of the kids were asked the following question, "Are you comfortable with me asking you these questions, or do you want to fill it out yourself?" *None* of the kids wanted to answer questions *asked out loud* to them *by an interviewer*. *All* of the kids opted to fill the questionnaire out themselves. Drawbacks to this approach were: the kids misunderstanding some of the questions, skipping questions, or writing illegibly. Although having the kids administer the questionnaire to themselves was not the original intention of the interview format, it ended up being the best method. Given the privacy of filling out these questionnaires, and assured we did not want to know their identity, these youths were extremely candid in responding to the questions.

[4]Currently, there is a phenomenon occurring in downtown Salt Lake City where middle and upper class youth are dressing up like homeless to go downtown and "slum" the *real* homeless kids. Hence, dirt under the fingernails, absence of jewelry, and dusty old, or holey shoes were important identifiers of legitimate street kids versus the "pretenders."

Subjects

Forty-three homeless adolescents elected to participate in the survey interview. The sample was made up of 32 males ages 14 to 20 (X = 17.2, SD = 1.2) and 11 females ages 13 through 20 (X = 16.4, SD = 1.8). The sex ratios of 75 percent male and 25 percent females among these homeless youth, selected randomly, approximates closely the same sex ratios currently seen in the older homeless population in the Salt Lake City area as well as what is reported in other major cities across the nation.

The majority of these youths (86.6 percent) had been on the streets at least once prior to their current situation, and nearly 25 percent (N = 10, 23.3 percent) had lived on the streets at least 12 times or more. Surprisingly, summary statistics indicated that the girls in this sample had a higher incidence of leaving home (X - 7.8, SD - 9.2) than the boys (X - 4.0, SD = 4.1), a mean difference which was statistically significant (t (41) - 1.82, p «.05). A closer examination of the data targeted this variance to two girls, each of which had runaway to the streets, 25 and 26 times, respectively. These findings suggest that significant proportion of these homeless youth (53.1 percent, N = 17 of the boys; and, 45.5 percent, N = 5 of the girls) demonstrate a persistent, or *chronic* pattern of life-style or life-pattern which is repeatedly taking them back to the streets.

Despite adverse climate conditions associated with winter in the Salt Lake area, more than half of these kids (N = 22, 51.2 percent) reported they live on the streets 12 months of the year. While some will attempt to migrate to warmer locations such as Phoenix or California before winter hits, the unfortunate majority (between 44.2 percent and 55.8 percent) will do the best they can during the cold months of October through March.

Most of these kids, 71.4 percent (N = 25), indicated their natural parents were no longer together, and an addition 8, or 8.6 percent were not sure. Only 7 of these youths or 25.9 percent, had a parent living in the Salt Lake area, while 74.1 percent (N = 20) reported their parents' residence as outside of Utah (Note: Three youths said they did not know where their parents were, and 2 reported both parents deceased). Over half of these kids, 51.2 percent N = 22, were from outside the Salt Lake area. Twenty-one (48.8 percent) were from outside of the state, and one (2.3 percent) was from the southern part of Utah. Nineteen of these kids came here alone or with a friend (N = 13 traveled by themselves, N = 6 said they had traveled with a sibling or friend(s)).

Findings

Factors Associated With Youth Homelessness

Number and Origin of Homeless Kids. Based on opinions provided by the youth themselves, it is estimated that there are approximately 100 to 150 homeless youth in the city at any give time. Estimates ranged from less than 25 to 500. The very breadth of the range itself is a strong indicator of how difficult it is to know how many kids are out on the streets. Even the kids themselves do not agree on the number.

More than half of our sample, 53.5 percent (N = 23), felt that youths like themselves were primarily from Salt Lake City and other parts of Utah, while the other 46.5 percent (N = 20) said local homeless kids were equally from parts of Utah as well as outside of the state.

Self-Referencing. Researchers are in agreement that homeless persons are heterogeneous. Unlike early perceptions surrounding homelessness which evoked stereotype images of "Hobos," "Bums," and "Winos," we now know that persons who find themselves without a place to stay, and are now on the streets are *people* of all ages, both sexes, and from broad social and economic backgrounds.

Similarly, homeless youths cannot be conceptually lumped into one homogeneous group. Some investigators feel they have identified two *circumstantially distinct* groups of adolescents on the streets, namely:

"Runaways" and "Throwaways" (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1990). Others claim there are three types, "Runaways," "Homeless," and "Societal Rejects" (Adams, Gullotta, and Clancy, 1985). Our study builds upon the premise of heterogeneity advanced by previous research, but takes it one step further, methodologically, by asking adolescents on the streets *what they call themselves* instead of labeling them.

Our research revealed three commonly used sets of terms of self-reference and one miscellaneous group. Specifically these categories were:

- "Homeless" or "a Throwaway" (N = 14, 40.0 percent),
- "Street Kid" or "Runaway" (N = 14, 40.0 percent),
- "Punk" or "Gutter Punk" (N = 3, 8.6 percent), and
- "a Human," "Normal," or "a Traveler" (N = 4, 11.4 percent).

As can be seen, our groupings overlap with the two studies cited above. While our first two categories correspond directly to street groups identified by Adams et al. (1985) and Finkelhor et al. (1990), the linkage between "Gutter Punk" and "Societal Reject" is also evident in that both terms connote attitudes or behaviors generally considered anti-establishment or anti-norm.

Content analysis revealed a subtle and hierarchical ranking associated with the use of these terms for self-labeling among our subjects. Self-reference in terms of "Homeless" or "Throwaway" had a higher tone of street status due to the obvious difficulties associated with *chronic* homelessness. These kids tended to come across as the most cognizant of the problems they were facing and were extremely candid in acknowledging their hardships and suggesting means by which they could be helped. "Street Kid" by itself, or in connection with "Runaway" also connoted a self-reliant, survivor-type of identity though not as strong as the former (“Homeless").

While a few kids identified themselves as "Runaways," in general this connotation was not esteemed by the most of our subjects. The general attitude was that "Runaways" had options—they had homes to go back to and were simply just playing at being on the streets. In the words of one informant "Runaways have no brains—they are throwing away a free ride!" The majority of the kids we talked to looked down on this. They did not feel they had these kinds of options—they *were* on the streets and it *was* their home—the only one they had. Finally, the label of "Punks" or "Gutter Punks" among the youth we interviewed connoted an even different identity. These kids were the most anti-establishment in physical appearance and mental attitudes. Their radical dress standard gives these youths an identity which is different from other street kids. It not only sets them apart from their peers, but advertises a fundamental message: they want to be free and independent—they do not want to be told what to do.

Sensitivity to the issue of group membership, or *type of youth* on the street is important for a number of reasons. First, it distinguishes important individual member characteristics, particularly values, attitudes, and needs. Second, it helps to place the teen in a larger social context, e.g. recognition of the personal and/or social problems that contributed to their eventual displacement to the streets. Finally, this understanding or orientation can help the community plan appropriate interventions and relief measures which will address the needs of these youths, their parents, and even unstable family units in the community leaning toward disintegration.

The general sense is that "Runaways" as a group make up one set of problems to be addressed both in prevention and intervention. "Homeless" and "Throwaways" come from a different set of circumstances, while "Punks/Gutter Punks" warrant another perspective. We disagree with Adams, et al. (1985) that these types of youth are progressively more complex (i.e. "Runaways" the least, "Societal Rejects" the most). Instead, we concur with Finkelhor, et al. (1990). Each of the groups represent *different sets of social problems*. We do not conceptually elevate one group over another in terms of deserving of resources or access to avenues of help. Nor do we presume that what is good for one *type of homeless youth* would be good for them all. Instead we advocate for informed consideration of the kinds of help *different types of street kids* may need to improve their condition. This brings us to our next point—circumstances leading to these youths leaving home.

Primary Cause for Leaving Home. Our study identified three distinct preconditions which lead to these teens making the ultimate decision to leave home and live on the streets. In order of reporting frequency, they were:

- 77.5 percent (N = 31) reported severe conflict and irreconcilable differences with their parent(s) which manifested as: communication breakdowns or tension, fighting, abuse, neglect, dysfunctional parents suffering from mental illness or drug/alcohol abuse, and in the extreme parents throwing them out or telling them to "get out,"
- 12.5 percent (N = 5) opted for the streets for reasons of personal freedom and wanting to be completely on their own, and
- 10.0 percent (N = 4) found themselves in difficult situations beyond their control which forced them to leave their family situations such as: extreme poverty—their family could no longer make it (parents could not get work in the area—this youth came from outside of Utah), poverty and extreme crowding conditions at home (too many kids), and political reasons—this youth was an illegal immigrant from South America.

According to the data, there appears to be some softening of animosity between parent(s) and child over time after leaving home. At the time they left home, most of these kids had very negative feelings toward their parent(s). Only 18.25 percent (N = 6) said they liked, or loved their parent(s), while 57.6 percent (N = 19) said they disliked their parents very much. Over time feelings toward their parent improved. At the time we interviewed these kids, 60.0 percent (N = 21) said they liked or loved their mom and 34.4 percent (N = 11) reported liking or loving their father.

In sum, these teens report feeling closer to their (natural) mothers than fathers. And among those who had step-parents, better relationships were reported with step-fathers than step-mothers.

Parent-child conflict is showing up consistently in the literature as *the primary pre-condition* leading to under-aged kids leaving home and ultimately ending up on the streets. Our finding of 77.5 percent leaving home for this reason, supports this trend. Interestingly, another study conducted in Hartford, Connecticut with the exact same sample size of N = 43 subjects (Adams, et al., 1985) found very nearly the same proportion of kids—74 percent in that sample were on the streets because of severe conflict with parent(s) at home.

Crime. Nearly half of our youth informants reported they had been a victim of a crime (46.5 percent, N = 20) with an average number of attacks being 2.9. Crimes against these kids ranged from being beaten up, to stabbed, robbed, raped, and shot at. In most cases, 54.5 percent (N = 12) they did not know their assailant, however, 45.5 percent (N = 10) did. These statistics are disturbing. Not only are these kids suffering an extraordinarily high incidence of crime in their life, but they know the person nearly half of

the time. Do they seek help? No. Eighty-five percent of the time these kids do not turn to agencies for help—*especially not the Salt Lake Police*. Two general themes throughout their interviews were the fact that street kids do not like to deal with the police, or, are afraid of them—even when they have a right to be protected.

Physical and Dental Health. On a self-reported health scale,[5] 46.5 percent reported their physical health as only "fair" or "poor" (X = 1.6, SD = .76). When asked what kinds of health conditions they had, the following was reported by 27.9 percent (N = 12): kidney, cervical cancer, lungs, bronchitis/or asthma, poor eyesight and hearing, strep throat, knees, a cold, and diabetes, and pregnant.

Given the poor health status of our sample, it is not surprising that nearly one-third of those we interviewed wanted to see a medical provider. Reasons listed were for a check-up, needing an AIDS test, cancer (previous history of cervical cancer), chronic sore throat, vision problems, pregnant and having other problems (cold), cervical cancer, and problems with their lungs.

One-third (34.9 percent, N = 15) of these kids had gone to the hospital at least once since they had been on the streets for such things as: being hit by a car (while skateboarding), being sick, cracked skull, cervical cancer operation, abscessed tooth, back injury, suffering stab wounds, mononucleosis, needing insulin, VD, pneumonia, kidney problems, and other multiple reasons (specifics not given).

Using the same self-report scale (as Health Status above), 44.2 percent (N = 19) reported their dental health as "fair" or "poor" (X - 1.7, SD = .89). Dental problems for which they needed immediate care included: cavities, tooth aches, teeth rotten/abscessed, wisdom teeth needing pulling, periodontal disease, and "I need braces on my teeth really bad."

Survival Strategies For Meeting Basic Needs

Food. Hunger is a stark reality for these kids on the streets. Nearly three-fourths of those we interviewed (74.4 percent, N = 32) said they were hungry most or all of the time. Only 11.5 percent (N = 5) of those we talked to reported they usually had three meals a day. Another 30.2 percent (N = 13) ate two meals a day, 34.9 percent (N = 15) depended on one meal, 14.0 percent (N = 6) lived primarily on snack foods only, and 9.3 percent (N = 4) reported they usually went without anything.

We asked these youths to rate how "nutritional or healthy" the food they regularly ate was. While slightly more than half (57.1 percent, N = 24) reported the quality of food they ate as "OK or good," the other 42.9 percent (N = 18) told us it was "spoiled, marginal (meaning not fresh or clean) or junk food." Food was gotten through a variety of means. Roughly 25 percent-33 percent took their meals at restaurants, while others relied on missions, the cathedral, food banks, panhandling for change in order to buy snacks at stores, or resorted to "dumpster diving."

Sleeping Arrangements. Most of these kids, 41.5 percent (N = 22), reported they sleep outside in such places as: parks or fields, parking garages, abandoned buildings, houses, or vehicles, next to the streets in the grass, in the hills, playgrounds, or on top of buildings. Another group, 30.2 percent (N = 16), slept in many different types of places, moving from place to place depending on circumstances. Some of the likely places these teens would go were: places considered "safe" and where their friends were, sometimes around the shelters or missions, places the police wouldn't find them and/or where they

[5] 0 = "Poor Health," 1 = "Fair," 2 = "Good," and 3 = "Excellent Health."

wouldn't be kicked out, some reported they didn't sleep for days on end, and others reported "sleeping with strangers." A last group fared somewhat better. Twenty-eight percent (N = 15), reported they slept *inside* at friends' apartments or houses.

On the average, 3-5 persons sleep at the same location although the number of persons may range as high as 40. Every kind of age grouping was described as sharing the common sleeping area. More than half (51.4 percent, N = 18) said they stayed with kids their age *and* adults, 28.6 percent (N = 10) sleep in areas *only* with other kids their age, and 20.0 percent (N = 7) stayed with adults. Although 3-5 persons was the average numbers of persons staying together, the range could go as high as 40 kids and/or 8 adults in one location.

Money. It is not difficult to imagine the difficulties that would be involved with holding down any type of work without a regular place to stay. Consequently, getting money is a major difficulty for these youth. Figure 2. (below) describes how these youth deal with this problem.

There seems to be a prevailing opinion among agency professionals in the community, that a common means for street kids to get money is by "selling drugs" and "selling sex or prostitution". Our findings did not substantiate this. While some youth reportedly made money selling drugs, the prevalence of this activity was only 18.6 percent (N = 8). With respect to the even more controversial opinion that street kids are "selling sex," we only came across one informant who readily acknowledged she was a prostitute. These kids did not frequently report stealing either (9.3 percent, N = 4), even though this is also a commonly held opinion by local agency personnel.

The point is, without 'hard data,' stereotyping can be, by default, mistaken as somehow reliable information about others. Anyone can fall into this pattern. However, if professionals do, it can lead to a hardened attitude towards certain groups. As Figure 2. shows, according to these kids, the primary means of obtaining money was panhandling, which nearly three-fourths of these youth (72.1 percent, N = 31) participated in, working odd jobs or part-time work accounted for another 27.9 percent and 25.5 percent, respectively, followed by a diverse range of activities.

Needs. One of the most important questions we asked was "What kinds of things do you need right now?" Not surprisingly, 97.6 percent of the kids (N = 41) responded that they need the basics, namely: food, shelter, place to wash, and clothing. Next came money. Fifty percent (N = 21) said they need a job so they could get money to take care of themselves. The desire to get back to their family and need for someone to care about them (not family specific) tied for the third most stated need (N = 4, 9.5 percent, each). Three youths (7.1 percent) said they wanted to finish school so they could have a better life, and one each said he needed help clearing up his criminal record; and another needed medical care (a diabetic who needed insulin). Finally, 19.0 percent (N = 18) listed personal needs from ID, or a sleeping bag, to needing to get to Florida, and 14.3 percent of the sample (N = 6) said they had *no needs*.

Social Services and Agency Contacts

Perceptions. We asked these kids a number of questions regarding services which are designed to help youths such as themselves. Specifically, the purpose of this portion of the survey was to understand from the client's perspective *how* Salt Lake's social services are perceived, and whether or not street kids use them.

Sixty percent (N = 24) of those we talked to felt that *some* social services were there to help them, while 40 percent (N = 16) strongly felt they were not. Pursuing why a large proportion felt available services were not helpful, we found that the primary reason had to do with *fear*. The biggest fear these kids mentioned was that of the police, the general feeling being they would be locked up or turned in (to foster homes, detention, or parents). Other comments surrounding the issue of fear, but not involving the police, had to do with the services themselves. Kids feared that somehow they would be locked up and lose their freedom, and also that confidentiality would not be respected, resulting in their parents finding out where they were. A major criticism of social services concerned the attitudes of the people working there. These youths did not feel like the services were intended to help kids *in their situation*, nor did they think the personnel really cared. Finally, for a small group of kids, using services is not an option because they want to make it on their own without help.

Youth Services. Eighty-six percent of these kids (N = 37) knew what Youth Services was, and more than half (N = 24, 55.8 percent) had used these services previously, primarily because they were taken there by force (N = 25, 67.5 percent). These kids were extremely vocal in their outrage toward this agency saying it was "a bad place," "they trap you," "it wouldn't help, I want *help*," "hated it," and so on. Only one teen stated it was helpful at the time.

History of Group Home or Foster Care. A recent nation-wide study of runaway youths, found that more than one-third (38 percent) of homeless youth had been in a type of foster care before they took to the streets (NASW, October 1991). In our study we found 57.1 percent (N = 24), or more than one in two kids we interviewed had been down this avenue and still ended up on the streets.

Other Social Services Used. Only 8 of the youth we interviewed (19.0 percent) reported they had used any Social Services, while 81.0 percent (N = 34) did not. Four kids periodically sought help from recovery centers (it was assumed they had been there previously for treatment), three kids said they had benefited from food stamps, tow mentioned youth services in California, and one each mentioned: the Department of Family Services, Job Corp, and the Cathedral for food.

Feelings or attitudes the kids had toward agencies (whether they had used them or not) was: one out of two kids (51.8 percent, N = 14) had a negative or indifferent impression of the agencies they *did* have experience with, but 29.0 percent (N = 8) felt positive. Another group, declined to express their feeling about agencies, but said they would like more information on what was available 18.5 percent (N = 5).

Summary. *Lock-up* is a fundamental issue with these kids, and they will go to extreme lengths to avoid it. *Breach of confidentiality* is another major concern they have in approaching agencies for help.

Social Support Networks

Gangs. Because of rumor and evidence of the formation of gangs being on the rise in American cities, we asked these kids about gangs in Salt Lake City. Seventy-eight percent (N = 33) confirmed the existence of gangs locally. Eighty percent (N = 32) said these gangs were not important to them (i.e. a form of social support), 80.0 percent also reported they had never belonged to one, and 97.4 percent (N = 37) said *they did not want to join!*

Social Support/Friends. The majority of these youth (79. percent, N = 34) report there is a code of honor to help one another on the streets. This code is described in various ways as a buddy system, watching each other's back, protection, and being "a family." The greatest values or benefits of a support system on the street are: companionship, protection, enjoyment, and pooling resources. Favors, and problem-solving are also assets.

Future Goals/Plans and Open Comments

We asked these youths if they wanted to get off the streets. Almost unanimously, 90.7 percent (N = 39), they answered "Yes." Only 4 youths (9.3 percent) blatantly said "No." Thematically, two reasons stood out: 56.4 percent (N = 22) said they wanted off the streets because they wanted stability so they could get their lives together; another 28.2 percent (N = 11) stated it was because life on the streets was hard, cold, and scary—they wanted a way out; one individual (2.6 percent) said he wanted to get off the streets but declined to say why; and one person said that he did *and* didn't want to change his life—that the street experience was both positive and negative. Finally, four youth (10.2 percent) said they wanted to continue their life as it was—it was a positive experience for them.

With respect to the future, one year from now, the majority of these youth had hopes for improvement in their current situation. More than one-third (35,7 percent, N = 15) thought they would be working, 26.2 percent (N = 11) said they would be leading a "normal life" or be with their family, 19.0 percent (N = 8) saw themselves back in school, but 11.9 percent (N = 5) saw their situation as hopeless, reporting they would still be doing the same thing.

Then we asked our youthful informants if there was anything they would like to say about their situation or needs on the streets. Here is some of what they told us in their own words:

> "I really need your help."
> "I hope someone cares enough about my needs."
> "Help the kids out there on the street."
> "Its almost impossible to survive while waiting for food stamps, Time is the killer."
> "The depression is bad."
> "I hope there are more people like you guys."
> "Help the ones that want help for themselves and hope the others come too."
> "Thanks for your help!"
> "Have a center (for street kids) to go to talk about street problems — someone to talk to that doesn't get paid."
> "A lot of us need help getting by without getting involved in the drug scene."

And finally,

> "Let the average person know we are not hoods—we are not criminals or bad people—just unfortunate."

Recommendations

Beyond collecting information about and fostering greater understanding of the homeless youth population in Salt Lake City, one of the primary objectives of this project has been to initiate actions to meet the needs and improve the quality of life of the city's street kids. To that end, findings of this report were presented in a workshop at the annual Utah Issues conference on poverty on October 30, 1992, in order to generate recommendations from professionals and the community for actions to assist homeless youth. Over 120 workshop participants, including social workers, juvenile justice officials, legislators, youth services and homeless services providers, advocates for the poor, formerly homeless youth, and concerned citizens developed a series of recommendations, which are listed below:

- A coalition of representatives of business and government should be formed to establish a non-profit "drop-in" center to provide "hassle-free" services for homeless youth in Salt Lake City.[6] Those services should include basic necessities such as: food, shelter, clothing, and access to medical and dental care.
- Outreach efforts utilizing street caseworkers should be developed.
- The Utah Division of Family Services should re-examine its policy of re-uniting families in all cases. If necessary, statutes should be changed to eliminate legal barriers to providing needed services to teens living on the street who cannot or will not be successfully or appropriately re-united with their family.
- The State Office of Education should strengthen and increase early intervention efforts, specifically by providing adequate counseling and mental health services, for youth at risk.
- The State Office of Education should work with appropriate agencies to assure access by young people to transitional skills training, such as job and independent living skills training.
- A statewide effort to provide specific services for homeless youth should be initiated because the need extends beyond Salt Lake City.
- Groups concerned about children's issues should re-examine state statutes pertaining to children's rights, in order to assure that homeless or throwaway youth who wish to live independently and be emancipated have that opportunity, as appropriate on a case by case basis.

In addition to the recommendations developed by the workshop, the authors include their own suggestions, which rely heavily upon the input and expertise of service providers and advocates throughout the community:

- Implement reforms in the foster care system, which should include adequate funding to balance caseloads, develop effective case management and treatment plans, provide improved training for foster care workers, expand the number of foster homes to meet the demand, better screen, train and supervise foster homes, and increase the number of juvenile court judges and guardian ad litem.
- Create job training/job coaching programs that are accessible to assist these youth in their efforts to live independently and off the streets.
- Foster greater cooperation and collaboration among agencies serving troubled youth and/or their families, especially to seek funding and implement integrated, multi-disciplinary programs and services for street kids.
- Through a media and public information campaign, improve the awareness and attitudes of service providers, juvenile justice authorities, elected officials, and the general public toward this unique population of youth.

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[6] In 1994 Visions of Altitude secured funding to open a drop-in center for Salt Lake's street children. However, the project ran into a snag when it was unable to find a location ("Volunteers Seek Drop-In Shelter for Salt Lake's Street Children," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, January 3, 1994; Anne Wilson, "Visions of Youth Home Hit a Wall," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 7, 1994); it was not until March 1995 that a building was located, and soon after a federal grant was awarded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to help with a permanent location. The drop-in facility has since opened and efforts are currently (December 14, 1998) underway to open a recently-purchased one-time nursing home for transitional housing for homeless kids.

Interviews With Key Informants

Prior to conducting the survey of homeless youth, project researchers interviewed a dozen adult "key informants" in order to gain a better understanding of the nature and extent of the homeless youth population in Salt Lake City, to refine the questionnaire, and to define the objectives and parameters of this study. Those interviewed are individuals who, in their professional capacities in law enforcement or at social service agencies, have had frequent or regular contact with homeless youth and experience in dealing with their problems and issues. All recognized that hard data about the population is unavailable, yet each key informant readily identified a number of issues where there was considerable consensus of opinion. In most instances, the subsequent data collected from interviews with the youth themselves bore out those impressions.

Estimates of the number of homeless youth in Salt Lake on any given day in 1990 ranged from 50 to 100 to "many". All respondents noted that there appear to be more adolescents living on the streets during March through October than during the colder months. Street kids were reported to be both local and from out-of-state with 75 percent or more from the Salt Lake metropolitan area. One police detective stated that there seem to be more girls than boys on the streets. Others did not venture an opinion on the sex ratios of the population.

Not surprisingly, all suggested the number one reason for adolescent homelessness was family trauma, dysfunctional family life, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse in the home, and an inability to get along with parents. Running away from home, being "on the run" from home, gangs, or agencies, or being "thrown out" by families were specifically cited. A second factor, desire for independence/being on"my own"/thinking that they "know it all" and can survive away from home, was reported by all key informants. One respondent suggested that these youth do not identify themselves as homeless or runaway, but think of themselves as independent or "on my own."

There was unanimous opinion that youth on the streets are often victims of crime and exploitation by others, and not infrequently by each other. All interviewed expressed that these youth are very vulnerable to crime, and most believed that they are often involved in criminal activities themselves, such as shoplifting, petty theft, trespassing status offenses and other crimes.

The consensus among key informants was that most homeless youth support themselves by selling or running drugs, stealing, and selling or trading sex. Only one fourth of those interviewed stated that homeless youth often worked in regular or "normal" jobs.

Reliance upon other homeless youth, friends, or "sugar daddies" was identified as an essential support system. Homeless youth stay or "flop" with friends, or pool their resources to pay for their housing. Others were thought to sleep in abandoned buildings.

Sexual activity was assumed to be high, both for bonding among peers and as a means to obtain favors, drugs, or necessities. While reciprocity and reliance upon one another was considered a strong characteristic within the population, no evidence of gang involvement was noted.

Most do not use agency services, according to key informants, because they have had bad experiences in the past with agencies, services do not meet their needs, youth were unaware that services were available to them or that they would qualify for some type of assistance, they felt they were able to do with aid, or most often, because of fear that agencies would "turn them in," "bust them," or return them to family situations that they did not want to go back to. Some noted that services are not well designed to meet the needs of this population and that there is a trust gap between providers and teens on the street.

Primary problems among homeless youth stated by respondents were emotional effects of feeling "not wanted" (abandonment, emotional neglect, lack of healthy family relationship), lack of health care or personal

hygiene, lack of survival skills/life skills/independent living skills, lack of self-esteem/direction/goals, and lack of food, shelter and housing resources/options.

Primary needs identified were life skills training, and employment assistance, transitional housing arrangements, health and mental health access, food and shelter, family counseling, and a caring supportive, safe environment.

Early intervention/prevention efforts in the schools, "safe houses," job and life skills training, structured group home or transitional independent living arrangements, housing and transportation assistance, and access to counseling were recommended.

In most respects, the views of the key informants were largely corroborated by the youth themselves. However, the data show a significant divergence in a few important areas. First, key informants believed that there was a much higher degree of prostitution and sexual activity among street kids than they themselves reported. While one might argue that these youth may be under-reporting sex on the streets to protect themselves or out of fear or embarrassment, the authorities are inclined to believe their youths' self-declarations, particularly in light of their openness on other sensitive issues raised in the survey and their high degree of awareness of the risks of AIDS from promiscuous sex. Just one of the 43 youth surveyed admitted to prostitution, a much smaller percentage of the sample than we might expect based on the impressions of key informants. Three out of four do report that they are sexually active. Yet, this does not strike us as aberrant or extraordinary, given the extreme survival pressures and self-esteem/reciprocity needs faced by these children, as well as their definition of themselves as emancipated "adults". This may be a case of adults making assumptions about a prevalence of promiscuity or prostitution based on paucity of data or stereotypes.

Second, contrary to the impressions of key informants, most adolescents living on the streets in Salt Lake City do consider themselves homeless. And surprisingly, over half of these kids were from outside the Salt Lake area. Over half were from out-of-state, who came here on their own or with a friend. Three of four reported that their parents lived outside of Utah.[7]

[7]The study of homeless children cites the following references:

Adams, G. R., T. Gullotta, and M. A. Clancy, 1985. Homeless Adolescents: A descriptive study of similarities and difference between runaways and throwaways. *Adolescence*, 20:79, 715-724.

Finkelhor, D., G. Hotaling, and A. Sedlak, 1990. Missing Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children in America, Executive Summary. University of New Hampshire.

The National Association of Social Workers, October 1991. A summary of findings from a national survey of programs for runaway and homeless youth and programs for older youth in foster care, with a description of a model program.